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### Holy Fools (and Angels too)

Happy Easter Fools Day! The last time Easter and April Fool's day coincided was 1956; it doesn't happen often, just four times last century. It will occur again in 11 years 2029. Kids, don't be fooled---watch out for chocolate covered Brussel sprouts!

The late great preacher and teacher of preachers, Fred Craddock, told the story of the church he and his wife Nettie used to attend when they lived in Tulsa, OK. That church had an Easter tradition of 15 years that resulted in 500 lilies adorning the sanctuary beautifully arranged in the shape of a cross up at the chancel. They were memorial lilies. You paid \$5.00 each in memory of a loved one, got it listed in the bulletin. Every year 500 lilies. The tradition didn't make it past 16 years however. That Easter at the conclusion of the service a dear elderly woman went up to the altar after the morning service, she said, "I'm going to visit a friend in the hospital and I'd like to take her my lily. Can I take the one I paid for?" No one said a word. She turned back to those who remained in the sanctuary and in a shocked voice said, "THEY'RE PLASTIC!"

There was concern, of course. "But we gave \$5.00 for lilies, if they're plastic they may be the same lilies from last year. And we gave \$5.00 last year too." Someone came up with the figure that over 15 years that's \$37,500 for the same lilies! The lilies had lasted for years, plastic lilies were stored in a cool covered dark place in the church basement. The minister defended the practice of having the fake lilies on theological grounds, "after-all, the plastic lilies are more appropriate to Easter because they always bloom, they never die."

Fool me once shame on me, fool me 15 consecutive years, shame on you. Is that how you may feel this Easter, for the first or fifteenth time? Fooled? Pranked? Idle tale. Hoax. Fraud perpetuated against humanity. Magical thinking and the like. Suspend the laws of nature. Easter as a plastic Fisher-Price toy or lily. Or misunderstood and literalized in ways that robs resurrection of the poetry it deserves.

The other day I asked the Sermon Shapers what constituted a good Easter sermon for them. The only common agreement was brevity! It's not about convincing you with irrefutable proofs or indisputable support for the Resurrection. Not a single one of the four NT gospels actually describe the resurrection; no camera set up in the tomb to record it---how would you even record mystery? No, all we have are the stories. And you have the luxury of appropriating them in a variety of ways; literal, metaphorically, symbolically, meaningfully. You've seen the New Yorker cartoon that shows two businessmen sitting in a bar, one clearly despondent. The unhappy one says to his companion: "I was on the cutting edge. I pushed the envelope. I did the

heavy lifting. I was the rainmaker. Then suddenly it all crashed when I ran out of metaphors.” Well, when Easter falls on April fool’s day there’s no absence of metaphors. I’ve not yet run out.

The phrase “fools rush in where angels fear to tread” implies that ignorant or inexperienced folks get involved in unfavorable situations which prudent people avoid. Wiser persons plan ahead and think matters through. Cue Elvis and his wonderful rendition of “I Can’t Help Falling in Love with You.” Wise men say, only fools rush in.

Amy Mears at Glendale Baptist in Nashville likes to tell the story about when she was young and her Baptist pastor father in Hartsville, South Carolina, had his church participate in the annual community sunrise service that was held in the local cemetery. Seems fitting.

What wasn’t fitting was that no one bothered to notice that the early date of Easter that year was before daylight savings time. So, the Lutheran minister led the hymn “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” the Baptist pastor prayed, and then the Methodist preacher preached. But not before going to his car to get a flashlight so he could see his sermon notes. When he had finished and the Presbyterian minister gave the benediction, everyone went home in pitch dark, the sun rising an hour after the end of the sunrise service. The whole point of the SUNRISE service is, well, SUNRISE. Consult the weather app to set the time for goodness sake! What fools, right? In the dark, that’s how many see this story and this faith. Darkness more than light; that’s how some view all of this and you can kind of understand that, really.

But the convergence of these days this year has reminded me of the way in which Easter reveals the double-edged foolishness of Jesus: he’s both the ultimate crucified fool and the ultimate prankster.

Is Easter a joke? Do you appreciate an Easter with notes of hilarity?

Which takes us to the episode in John’s Gospel, the story of Mar, Peter, and another disciple whom Jesus loved.

Mary Magdalene has broken through her fear in order to tend to the body of her teacher and friend. All gospel accounts of this moment vary on some points. But what is consistent is the day and that it is Mary Magdalene who is the first to go to the tomb. But she doesn’t rush inside. When Mary finds that the stone has been removed she jumps to conclusions. Her perception of what has happened is that someone has entered and stolen the body. But the author does not tell us if she entered or even looked in the tomb. Did she really know that the body of Jesus was not there? (How often do we jump to conclusions about God’s actions in our lives?) Nevertheless, she runs back to tell Peter what she believes has happened.

Act two shifts to the experiences of Peter and the unnamed disciple intriguingly identified only as “the one whom Jesus loved,” let’s say it’s John for simplicity sake.

Like Mary they run. The unnamed disciple, perhaps younger, arrives first. Since he could be the junior partner, he waits until the senior partner, Peter, arrives. He (or could it be she) allows Peter to be the first to enter. Of course, Peter the fool, rushes in. Inside, Peter discovers that

the tomb is, indeed, empty. And unlike the four-day dead Lazarus, who stumbled out of his tomb hindered by his burial wrappings (John 11:44), the cloths are still in the tomb. The details are intriguing. The author describes the placement of the wrappings, but also notes that the cloth that had covered Jesus' head has been rolled up and put in another part of the tomb. We should note that the tomb is truly empty when Peter and then the other disciple enter. There is no angel; no heavenly messenger. In that scene of the story they fear to tread.

John tells us that the beloved disciple "saw and believed." But what did he believe? It could be that he believed Mary was correct -- someone had stolen the body of Jesus. Some people just rush to belief, it's not a difficult or anguished

Act two ends as the two go home. There are no shouts of joy, no celebration. The emptiness of the tomb does not seem yet to have made a difference.

The focus returns to Mary standing outside of the tomb. Weeping, however this time she does enter the tomb. It would seem that neither Peter nor the disciple have offered any words of comfort or encouragement to Mary. But Mary does not find an empty tomb. While the body of Jesus is not there, like the synoptic gospel accounts, there are two angels. In response to their almost ridiculous question (itself an April foolish question). We weep like Mary when we've suffered this kind of loss, whether death or any unspeakable loss of hope. Mary repeats her interpretation of the situation; the theft of her friend's body.

All Lenten season we've been surrounded, maybe unawares, of angels in this sanctuary. The Fine Arts Committee placed the exhibit "Angels as Messengers" for our aid to the season. Back on the left wall, my left, is the one that deals with today's Easter scripture text. Angels in the Bible generally have one line in the Christmas and Easter pageants: DO NOT BE AFRAID. The angels of Easter weren't afraid to tread at the tomb of Jesus. But it was sort of a foolish question to ask grief-stricken Mary at the cemetery, "Why are you weeping?" We weep because we've suffered loss, Mr. Angel.

And by mistaking Jesus as the gardener---how's that for an Easter Fool's joke---Mary is surprised by the calling of her name and in that moment she sees. It's amazing how angels, the Divine, your neighbor masquerading as Jesus can just speak your name and enter into your pain and bring healing. It can start with the calling of your name, someone "getting" you and understanding your journey, hearing you and your story, of walking alongside you in grief.

It can also start by claiming your identity and standing in it with confidence and pride.

I was on a plane last December to Dallas and had small talk with the guy one seat over from me. Then, predictably, he asked the question where conversations go to die, "what do you do?" "I'm a minister." "Well, that's a shame," he said, "you seem brighter than that." He winked but he was only half-joking. "I find it difficult that anyone would want to voluntarily associate with a religion that is anti-intellectual, anti-woman, anti-civil rights, anti-science, anti-gay, anti-immigrant, anti-anti-anti" He's legion, isn't he? When I told him that my own persuasion in the Christian faith shares his abhorrence of such narrow, mean, and rigid belief, he couldn't hardly

believe me. But you really should've seen his face when he asked what denomination I was a part of! "You're foolin' me, there's no way you're a Baptist. I've never met a Baptist like you." I suspect not. With my own wink I said, "Well, I've met plenty of sceptics like you, trust me. You're not that unique." It's embarrassing, isn't it, when people immediately dismiss, diminish or deride because of all the truly stupid foolishness (not gospel foolishness) done in the name of the Christian faith. Like when you agree with and have substantial more appreciation for the genius possessed by the recently deceased Stephen Hawking than you with do fly-by-night televangelist.

As Brene Brown says in her book **Rising Strong**, "I don't believe faith and reason are natural enemies. I believe our human desire for certainty and our often-desperate need to 'be right' have led to this false dichotomy. I don't trust a theologian who dismisses the beauty of science or a scientist who doesn't believe in the power of mystery." Neither do I. Truth is not captured and sealed up in a tomb for posterity. Church isn't a museum or mausoleum, shrine to a dead faith but alive with wonder and joy.

We do not offer proof or evidence today just the witness of the story. These stories were told and believed, told and believed. "I have seen the Lord." And in the mystical memory of the Church it has become the governing narrative of gospel. This doesn't mean you shut down your mind or give up on studies or seek the truth in all arenas of life, simply that love trumps death, resurrection overcomes crucifixion, and forgiveness overtakes guilt, shame, and mistake. It might be foolish to believe that but I do.

Holy fools rushing in with messages of love, grace, and forgiveness. Or mystery and mercy. We speak, sing, and say of grace to persons who have never been extended favor in their entire lives; of forgiveness to those who can't even fathom its possibilities; and of mystery to those who laugh at your lack of rational faculties. There is something foolishly exciting about proclaiming hope where there's been no hope; about discovering love in a world so full of hate; about calling for peace in a country obsessed with violence; about calling for justice where whether in Sacramento last week or last year in Baton Rouge young black men are murdered without consequence; about saying that despite all appearances of a good Friday world, there is a greater reality named resurrection. The tomb of loss became the womb of life. God gives life to the dead. The God of second, third, fifteen chances. This is indeed the day of new beginnings. That's what makes this not simply good advice but good news. Christ is risen and wishes to raise all of us and each of us to new life. We are to be new here not wanting for heaven to be made new, to discover real life before death You see Easter is not just about Jesus; it is also about you. He's already claimed his new life; now is your chance to claim yours. Resurrection life is for all. It's about opening your own heart to new life. As Paul Tillich once put it: Nothing is more surprising than the rise of the new within ourselves.

But it always involves death. Don't let that slip by you. Don't be fooled. Craddock's pastor in that story was wrong, plastic lilies never bloom for that which blooms has to die and that which dies will bloom again.

This Lenten season I read the touching and poignant memoir of Duke Divinity School church history professor, Kate Bowler. Her book discloses her journey into illness with all the medical madness that goes with it after getting the news at age 35, this new Mother of a now two-year old, diagnosed with incurable stage four cancer. The book's title is "**Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved.**" She wrote an op-ed for the New York Times in late January that attracted me to her story and the book.

Bowler writes: "Every 90 days I lie in a whirling CT machine, dye coursing through my veins, and the doctors look to see whether the tumors in my liver are growing. If they are not, the doctors smile and schedule another scan. The rhythm has been the same since my doctors told me I had stage IV colon cancer two and a half years ago. I live for three months, take a deep breath and hope to start over again. I will probably do this for the rest of my life. Whatever that means. When my scan is over, I need to make clear to my friends and my family that though I pray to be declared cured, I must be grateful. I have three more months of life. Hallelujah."

She was asked how her illness has changed her as a parent and she said: "I became less invested in milestones and also those lovely hallucinations we have, when our kids are going to become astrophysicists. I also decided that my job is not to try to make the world safe. I think I thought you just create a beautiful, Instagram-y bubble for your kid, and then that's parenting. And then I realized that I was going to be the worst thing that happened to him if it went badly. I couldn't live with that. I decided that my new parenting philosophy is that I can't protect him from the pain of the world, but I can show him that there is truth and beauty in the midst of it. And if I can make him that person, then I have won as a parent."

"We all harbor the knowledge, however covertly, that we're going to die, but when it comes to small talk, I am the angel of death. I have seen people try to swallow their own tongue after uttering the simple words "How are you?"

Some people minimize spiritually by reminding me that cosmically, death isn't the ultimate end. "It doesn't matter, in the end, whether we are here or 'there.' It's all the same," said a woman in the prime of her youth. She emailed this message to me with a lot of praying-hand emoticons. I am a professor at a Christian seminary, so a lot of Christians like to remind me that heaven is my true home, which makes me want to ask them if they would like to go home before me. Maybe now?

Atheists can be equally bossy by demanding that I immediately give up any search for meaning. One told me that my faith was holding me hostage to an inscrutable God, that I should let go of this theological guesswork and realize that we are living in a neutral universe. But the message is the same: Stop complaining and accept the world as it is." Is Bowler a fool? A fool for Christ, certainly.

From Saint Francis to Pope Francis, who again this past Maundy Thursday infuriated conservative critics may washing the feet of prisoners. Holy fool. From Dorothy Day to Fanny Lou Hamer. From Sojourner Truth to Dr. King.

Stephen Colbert, late night talk show host/comedian considers himself a “fool for Christ”; his Catholic faith grounding his identity. He said he defines foolishness for Christ as the willingness to be wrong in society, or wrong according to our time, but right according to our conscience, as guided by the Holy Spirit.” Colbert went on to say that “faith ultimately can’t be argued, it is to be more experienced than explained. Logic itself will not lead me to God, but my love of the world and my gratitude for it will.” Give that guy a pulpit. I guess he already has one. Holy fool.

Back to Kate Bowler for the last word in the Easter sermon. She was talking to her sister Maria, a form of Mary you know, and she told Kate on one very bad day: “Yes, the world is changed, dear heart, but do not be afraid. You are loved, you are loved. You will not disappear. I am here.” Holy fool and an angel too.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.